

SMS GUIDE



Here are some of the different platforms you can use to send bulk SMS messages to participants in your community engagement projects.

ECHOMOBILE

www.echomobile.org

Costs: \$60 USD/month plus SMS costs. Extra costs for shortcodes (optional).

PROS

- Easy-to-use interface
- Requires no back-end installation
- Good documentation
- Messages and materials stored in project folders (rather than chronologically) which makes organization and retrieval of important messages easier to find.
- Contact information can be used to sort preferences (such as language preferences or areas of interest)
- Supports surveys, broadcast messages and IVR (Interactive Voice Response)
- Shortcodes can be built in to make SMS free for contacts (at an extra charge for project administrators)
- Android app for mobile data collection (EchoAgent)
- Feature to interpret incomplete or inaccurate poll responses
- Auto-reminder for recipients that have not responded to questions

CONS

- Limited language support (English only)
- Can only receive unstructured responses from unknown users with a predefined keyword (such as "HELP")
- Limited number of contact groups
- Shortcodes only available in Kenya and Tanzania (as of Dec 2014)

FRONTLINE

www.frontlinesms.com

Costs: FrontlineSMS v2: free; FrontlineCloud: \$25 USD/mo. Both plus SMS costs.

PROS

- Very good for unstructured two-way communication
- Cloud (FrontlineCloud) and desktop (FrontlineSMS) versions (desktop requires no internet access to administrate). Cloud version requires no installation
- History of work with a wide variety of organizations, including not-for-profits and radio
- Strong support and consulting services to help the design of custom programs
- Platform has been deployed in a wide variety of international settings in numerous languages (more than any other SMS platform)
- Keywords in incoming messages can trigger automated actions such as responses, adding contacts or analytics
- Easy-to-use, intuitive interface
- “SmartGroups” utility which sorts contacts into specified groups based on common variables

CONS

- Occasional problems importing contacts and sending messages with non-Latin characters
- Surveys can only contain one question. For multiple question surveys, multiple surveys must be created
- No scheduled SMS broadcasts
- Lack of text and numeric comparison logic to interpret poll responses
- Firewalls and anti-virus software occasionally pose issues with Frontline

GROUND SOURCE

www.groundsourc.co

PROS

- Fairly intuitive interface
- Supports multiple questions within a given post
- Completely online platform
- Includes ability to create social media bot
- Shortcode option

CONS

- Limited data export options
- Users or participants cannot be searched for by their unique ID (phone number)
- Limited use of metadata for search purposes
- Difficult to ascertain relationships between users, posts and responses
- No multi-language support

TELERIVET

www.telerivet.com

Costs: Test account (limited to 50 SMS/day) that is free, except for the costs of the SMS.

Standard accounts starts at \$30 USD/month (limit: 5,000 SMS/day) plus SMS costs.

PROS

- Well-balanced- performs well over all basic SMS platform criteria
- Intuitive user interface
- Strong data export options- including Excel
- Emulator provided to test and surveys and workflows prior to deployment
- Surveys can be deployed with rules-based, pre-written responses
- Data analytics instantly available
- Strong contact management tools
- Selection of if/then conditions with actions they can trigger

CONS

- Web-based system that needs an aggregator or android app to sync to the service to send and receive messages
- Creating complex surveys may be overwhelming for inexperienced administrators
- Lack of voice messaging and IVR

TEXTIT (RAPID PRO)

www.textit.in and www.community.rapidpro.io

Costs: Between \$0.012 USD and \$0.02 USD per message plus SMS costs.

PROS

- Very strong in most SMS platform areas
- Can easily produce guided surveys with rules-based, pre-written responses. Can automate many workflow initiatives
- Android app for offline data collection available
- Strong multilingual features- SMS can be sent to users depending on language preferences
- No installation required, however at least one phone needs to be synced to the service to send and receive messages
- TextIt/RapidPro allows for several automated procedures
- Surveys can be easily created and users segmented into working groups for further conversation/discussion
- Intuitive, clean interface
- If/then conditions and associated triggered actions
- Voice message and IVR input choices for low literacy populations

CONS

- Costs are difficult to calculate depending on project/initiative
- English the only “back-end” language
- Message service management cannot be separated into separate projects

VOTO MOBILE

www.votomobile.org

The platform itself is free, users pay only for SMS.

PROS

- Very strong IVR and audio capabilities, which may make it a good fit for less literate countries
- SMS and voice surveys can be responded to via SMS or IVR
- Intuitive, ease of use
- Free of cost other than SMS fees
- Decision trees can be developed for more advanced surveys
- Good analytics for voice engagement
- Strong language options. Record content in multiple languages and deliver based on participant preference
- “Call-to-Record” feature enables voice message translation

CONS

- Better developed for audio and voice messaging than SMS
- Focuses mainly on African countries, but can be modified for use worldwide with an Android app or aggregator
- Weak documentation
- Without customization, 2-way messaging only works in the US, Canada and Ghana. Other countries can be accessible via application
- Lack of text and numeric comparison logic for interpreting poll responses
- Contact fields cannot be updated based on poll responses

OTHER PLATFORMS FOR UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES

MAGPIhome.magpi.com

Note: This may not be a perfect solution in many cases, but the data collection and analysis aspects make it worthy of consideration for certain projects.

Costs: Free account that also includes 10 free SMS. Pro accounts start at \$500 USD/month and enterprise accounts at \$10,000 USD/year.

PROS

- Very adept at data collection
- Supports mobile data collection, broadcast communication, guided SMS surveys, text-to-speech and IVR
- Strong data analysis- exported in a variety of formats

CONS

- Forms must be designed on the Magpi website prior to deployment
- Contact management is unpolished
- Magpi is primarily used in the health care sector
- Probably not the best choice projects requiring two-way communication as a primary objective
- English the only supported language

TERA (TRILOGY EMERGENCY RELIEF APPLICATION)www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/beneficiary-communications/tera/

Note: TERA, while lacking many of the usual SMS platform features, has one remarkable feature that other SMS platforms do not. Specifically, TERA allows administrators to send messages to unknown contacts at known locations such as cell phone towers- whether their numbers are known or not. The service provides mapping tools that allow admins to select a cell phone tower and send messages to anyone within range. Obviously, this has significant ramifications for disaster relief efforts.

PROS

- Messages sent out have the look and feel of public service announcements
- Targets all cell phones within the range of a specific mobile tower, which can be selected using an incorporated mapping tool.

CONS

- Lacks robust survey and data collection tools
- So far the platform has only been made available to the International Red Cross, but indications are that TERA may be made available for wider use
- TERA must be installed on a workstation and integrated into Mobile Network Operations to allow for mapping/ isolating cell phone towers.
- Lengthy setup (coordination with MNO's)